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CIA Goes Casual

By Marilyn Berger
Newsday Diplomatic Correspondent

The popular image of the CIA operative usually comes straight from the movies: a slightly soiled trench coat, a turned-up collar, sunglasses. But in Laos, at least, the reality is apt to be less James Bond and more a clean-cut fellow in a sport shirt.

For years now, the Central Intelligence Agency has played a covert role in the twilight war of Laos. (Some call it a nonwar in a noncountry.) For years, the agency's undercover activity has been known, but its role has somewhat changed.

In the more free-wheeling days, there was the chance to set up strongmen, polarize political forces and even fill up money bags to buy votes. But now, the CIA, through its agents in their sport shirts, apparently is training and equipping an army of Meo tribesmen.

The fact that the "spies," or "spooks" as they are semi-affectionately called in government lingo, are involved in training an army, a job that might be expected to fall to the Pentagon, is not entirely sinister. Ever since the signing of the Geneva accords in 1962, the U.S. has sought to maintain the fiction that it is abiding by the rules, and that means keeping out American troops. The last four Presidents felt that the accords, which the U.S. accuses Hanoi of being the first to violate, could best be restored if appearances, at least, were observed.

Those within the government who are sympathetic to that view are deeply concerned about the current congressional uproar over U.S. involvement in Laos. They say that congressional leaders, as well as the members of the Senate and House committees dealing with the CIA, armed services and appropriations, have known for years what was going on in Laos. They say that the activity was funneled through the CIA not to keep it secret from the American people but rather to preserve the necessary facade for international diplomacy.

Of course, it was not only for the sake of appearances that the CIA did the job in the old days. In the Dulles-Dulles era, when John Foster Dulles was secretary of state and his brother Allen headed the CIA, the agency had a relatively free hand, and in Laos, it did a lot more than gather intelligence and recruit local agents.

It was in 1957 that the agency started exerting noticeable influence on the political affairs of that perennially unsettled country. In an effort to dispel the apathy, dissension and lack of organization among the non-Communist Lao, the CIA apparently helped organize the Committee for the Defense of National Interests. The committee described itself as a mass patriotic organization, rather than a political party, which favored civil service reforms and a "hard" line against the Communist Pathet Lao.

The Communists considered its members "lackeys" to American interests, and it appeared that the organization's dependence on the CIA ultimately lent some truth to that.

The committee became the stepladder for a future Laotian leader who was so closely tied to the CIA that he was known to its agents as "our boy." That leader was Phoumi Nosavan.

Phoumi was, by all reports, a patriot who genuinely sought to develop the country, but he was not above accepting huge sums from a foreign power. Phoumi was so valuable that the CIA rigged the 1960 election in his favor.

If Laotian politics were confused, there was something of a match within the American diplomatic community in Laos. The ambassador was never sure that he was in charge of his own mission, and in many cases was sure that he was not. The CIA was forever pushing for greater activism. Its agents "free-wheeled it," in the words of one informed source, and engineered a coup. And then another one six months later.

Phoumi had begun to count on the CIA, which had chosen him over Souvanna Phouma. But just when Phoumi really needed help, the CIA began feeling a clampdown ordered by President Kennedy because of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. In Laos, where Winthrop Brown was ambassador, the CIA was forced to argue its cases through channels. Officials say that the reins have been tight ever since.

The U.S. started arming and training the Meo tribesmen as early as 1960. Yet it was the recent disclosure that the U.S. was arming the Meos, tough tribesmen with a particular grudge against the North Vietnamese, that helped trigger the current uproar against U.S. activities in Laos. Many of the 1,040 Americans admitted to be working in Laos scene reportedly are with the tribal army.

The army is headed by Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, a Laotian military commander in northeastern Laos who keeps his people in line by force of leadership and also by having one wife for each of the four tribal areas. The Meos have been successful in their battles beyond any expectation and have become a significant thorn in the side of Hanoi. It is believed that the North Vietnamese have made elimination of Vang Pao and his tribesmen one of the goals in their current Laotian offensive.

The CIA and how it grew in Laos is, in an ironic way, almost a success story which runs from the error of trying to set up a western-type army with a military strong man in Phoumi Nosavan to the arming of a highly able guerrilla warrior, Vang Po. What is happening in Laos now, one informed source said, is what should have been done in Vietnam.